Being "Under the Influence" of the Holy Spirit: Greek Linguistic and Cultural Background of Ephesians 5:18

Executive Summary

When Paul wrote "do not be drunk with wine…but be filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18), the contrast was immediately intelligible to the Ephesian church on multiple levels simultaneously: lexical, cultural, religious, and philosophical. Ancient Greek possessed a rich vocabulary of terms — *methuskō*, *entheos/enthousiasmos*, *katochos/theolēptos*, *oinōsis* — that described states of being controlled, saturated, inspired, or seized by an external force, whether wine or divinity. The Ephesian recipients lived in a city dominated by Dionysiac cult worship, where drunkenness was not mere self-indulgence but a formal theological act — the mechanism by which a worshiper became "filled with the spirit of Dionysus." Paul's injunction was not merely ethical; it was a direct counter-liturgy, replacing the Bacchic formula of spirit-possession-through-wine with the Christian reality of being saturated and governed by the Holy Spirit.

The Greek Text and Its Grammatical Contours

The key clause in Ephesians 5:18 reads: **καὶ μὴ μεθύσκεσθε οἴνῳ, ἐν ᾧ ἐστιν ἀσωτία, ἀλλὰ πληροῦσθε ἐν Πνεύματι** (*kai mē methuskesthe oinō, en hō estin asōtia, alla plērousthe en Pneumati*).

The verb *methuskesthe* (μεθύσκεσθε) is the present passive imperative of *methuskō* (μεθύσκω, Strong's 3182), derived from *methu* (μέθυ), the root word for fermented wine. The present tense imperative indicates a general ongoing precept — Paul is prohibiting not merely a single act of drunkenness but a pattern or way of life characterized by being intoxicated. The passive voice is significant: *methuskō* in the passive describes the state of *being acted upon by* the wine — the individual is rendered passive, subject to the controlling agency of alcohol.[1] [2] [^3]

The contrasting imperative *plērousthe* (πληροῦσθε, "be filled") is also a present passive imperative, creating a precise grammatical and structural parallel. As the drunk person is the passive object of wine's controlling power, so the believer is enjoined to be the passive object of the Spirit's filling and governing activity. The prepositional phrase *en Pneumati* (ἐν Πνεύματι) is grammatically debated — while popularly rendered "with the Spirit," the instrumental dative more precisely means "by means of the Spirit," indicating the Spirit as *agent* rather than content. The fullness itself, as Paul's argument in Ephesians 3:19 indicates, is the "fullness of God" (*πλήρωμα τοῦ θεοῦ*); the Spirit is the divine *means* by which that filling is accomplished.[4][5] [6][7] [^8]

The Semantic Range of *Methuskō*: "Soak, Saturate, Control"

Understanding why the Ephesians would have heard "under the influence" in Paul's prohibition requires appreciating the full semantic range of *methuskō* and its cognates. The verb derives from *methu* (μέθυ), a pre-classical term for wine itself (paralleled in Sanskrit *madhu*, "honey/intoxicant"). *Methuskō* in its active form means "to intoxicate, to make drunk" and in the passive "to be intoxicated" or "to be soaked/saturated".[9][2]

The related verb *methuō* (μεθύω, Strong's 3184) carried the imagery of being so thoroughly saturated with wine that the normal governing faculties — reason, will, motor function — are overridden. There also existed a distinct and lighter term, **oinōsis** (οἴνωσις, "being under the influence of wine"), which described a milder state of intoxication, with *methuskō* representing the more thorough, controlling degree beyond mere oinōsis. This lexical gradient — from *oinōsis* (mild influence) to *methuskō* (full intoxication/saturation/control) — confirms that Greek speakers had an explicit vocabulary for gradations of being "under the influence."[10][11]

The root metaphor embedded in the *methu*-family of words is that of *saturation* and *domination*. Wine soaks into a person and progressively supplants the person's own governing agency. By using the passive of *methuskō*, Paul frames drunkenness linguistically as being *controlled by* or *dominated by* wine — precisely the "under the influence" connotation English idiom carries.[12][1]

Entheos, *Enthousiasmos*, and the Vocabulary of Divine Possession

Greek culture had an equally developed vocabulary for describing states where a *divine* force — rather than wine — took possession of and governed a person. These terms were immediately familiar to educated first-century Ephesians.

Entheos and *Enthousiasmos*

The most culturally pervasive was **entheos** (ἔνθεος), an adjective meaning literally "having the god within" or "the one in whom god is present" (*en-* ["in"] + *theos* ["god"]). One who was *entheos* was spoken of as *enthousiazein* — "to be inspired or possessed by a god, to be rapt, to be in ecstasy". The substantive *enthousiasmos* (ἐνθουσιασμός) denoted "divine inspiration" or "divine possession," the state experienced by the Pythia at Delphi (possessed by Apollo), by the Bacchantes (possessed by Dionysus), and by poets (possessed by the Muses). Socrates himself taught that the inspiration of poets is a form of *enthousiasmos*. The modern English word "enthusiasm," stripped of its original weight, derives directly from this concept of having a god internally inhabiting and driving a person.[13][14] [^15]

Theolēptos, *Theophorētos*, and *Katochos*

Greek religious vocabulary also included several other technical terms for divine seizure:

- **Theolēptos** (θεόληπτος): "seized by a god" (*theo-* + *lēptos*, from *lambanō*, "to seize/take"), describing someone suddenly and forcefully possessed by divinity.[16][17]

- **Theophorētos/Theophoros** (θεοφόρητος / θεοφόρος): "borne by a god" or "god-bearing," used for a person who serves as a vessel in which the deity resides and acts.[^16]
- **Katochos** (κάτοχος): "held fast," "seized and restrained" — used in magical papyri and inscriptions to describe someone held under the grip of a spiritual power.[^17]

These terms, catalogued in the Oxford Classical Dictionary's entry on religious possession, collectively formed a register of "being under the influence" of a divine power, carrying the exact structural parallel to *methuskō*: an external agent (god rather than wine) has taken hold of the person and is governing their speech, movement, and inner experience.[^17]

Plato's *Theia Mania* (Divine Madness)

This cultural vocabulary extended even into philosophy. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato distinguished four forms of *theia mania* (θεία μανία, "divine madness") — prophetic, telestic (ritual), poetic, and erotic — all involving the god coming *within* the human soul and displacing or elevating normal rational consciousness. Plato's Socrates argues that the inspired madman's poetry surpasses that of a sane man, precisely because the divine agent within is superior to the human agent. This framework was well-known in Hellenistic urban centers like Ephesus, and it provided an intellectual context in which being "moved by" or "controlled by" a divine spirit was a recognized and even celebrated state.[18][19] [^20]

The Dionysiac Cult at Ephesus: Wine as the Vehicle of the Spirit

The most immediately relevant cultural context for the Ephesian readers was not abstract philosophy but the active religious cult of **Dionysus/Bacchus**, which was deeply embedded in the city of Ephesus and across the Roman province of Asia in the first century.[21][8] [^22]

Dionysiac Theology: Drunkenness *Is* Spirit-Filling

The Dionysiac cult operated on a specific theological principle: **wine was the earthly vehicle through which the god entered and filled his devotees.** Dionysus was god not merely of wine but of *ecstasy, ritual madness, and spiritual possession*. His festivals — the Bacchanalia — were explicitly designed as experiences of divine filling. The frenzied devotees (Maenads, Bacchantes) achieved their possession-state through wine consumption, music, and dance. As Euripides dramatized in the *Bacchae*, possession by Dionysus dissolved the boundaries between human and divine, between rational self and ecstatic other.[23][24] [25][26] [27][21]

The theological equation was explicit: **to be drunk with wine = to be filled with the spirit of Dionysus.** One ancient source notes that "the idea was that by ingesting wine, you ingested the god and became one with the spirit of Dionysus". This was not metaphor to the Bacchic worshiper; it was the operational theology of the rite. First-century Ephesus hosted Dionysiac festivals with archaeological attestation — papyrus invitations to symposia (P.Oxy. 1704) advertise gatherings that began at sundown and ended in public disorder, and reliefs from the Prytaneion depict participants staggering with raised cups.[8][27] [22][21]

Paul's Polemical Counter-Liturgy

Against this background, Paul's injunction in Ephesians 5:18 reads as an explicit theological polemic: *Do not be filled by the spirit of Dionysus through wine (that is debauchery/asōtia) — instead, be filled by the Holy Spirit.* The structural parallelism is total:[28][22] [^21]

Dionysiac Formula	Pauline Counter-Formula
Drink wine (*methuskō*)	Do not be drunk (*mē methuskesthe*)
Wine is the vehicle of filling	Spirit is the agent of filling (*en Pneumati*)
Become possessed by Dionysus	Be filled by/with God (*plērousthe*)
Result: ecstatic frenzy, asōtia	Result: psalms, hymns, thanksgiving (5:19-20)
Loss of rational self-control	Sobriety, mutual submission (5:21)

Some scholars note that certain new believers in Asia Minor may have been *continuing* this association — carrying Dionysiac assumptions into church practice, equating wine-induced ecstasy with Spirit-filling. Paul's prohibition directly addressed this syncretistic danger while simultaneously affirming the *reality* of Spirit-filling: the Spirit genuinely does what wine only counterfeits.[^21]

Acts 2 and the *Nēphalios Methē*: The Apostolic Precedent

A further layer of resonance came from the Pentecost narrative, which Paul and the Ephesian church would have known. In Acts 2:13, observers watching the Spirit-filled disciples speaking in tongues mocked them: "They have had too much wine" (*gleukous memestōmenoi eisin* — "they are full of new wine"). The Spirit-possession was so visibly analogous to drunkenness that the charge was plausible enough to require Peter's rebuttal. This Pentecost incident provided the early church with a living illustration of the "under the influence" parallel, confirming that the outward signs of Spirit-filling — ecstatic behavior, bold speech, flushed appearance — overlapped experientially with those of intoxication.[29][30] [^28]

Philo of Alexandria, the first-century Jewish philosopher writing in Greek who was a contemporary of Paul, gave the parallel its most precise theoretical treatment. In *De ebrietate* (§147), Philo observes: *"For in the case of those who are under the influence of divine inspiration, not only is the soul accustomed to be excited and as it were to become frenzied, but also the body is accustomed to become reddish and of a fiery complexion, the joy which is internally diffused... by which many foolish people are deceived, and have fancied that sober persons were intoxicated."* This Philonic observation establishes that in the cultural-intellectual milieu of Paul's world, it was widely recognized that divine inspiration *looked like* and was structurally parallel to drunkenness.[^28]

It was Philo who coined (or at least popularized) the paradoxical Greek expression **nēphalios methē** (νηφάλιος μέθη) — **"sober intoxication"** or *sobria ebrietas* in the Latin tradition. This oxymoron became one of the most important conceptual formulations in early Christian mystical theology, studied by Hans Lewy in his 1929 monograph *Sobria Ebrietas: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der antiken Mystik*. The phrase captured exactly what Paul was

commending: a state of being genuinely "under the influence" of divine power — spiritually intoxicated, moved, carried — while simultaneously maintaining the sobriety and lucidity of Spirit-borne self-control.[31][32] [33][34]

The Patristic Reception: How the Church Unpacked the Parallel

The earliest interpreters of Ephesians 5:18 understood the "under the influence" parallel as its central communicative force, not a peripheral illustration.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 313–386) told his catechumens directly: *"They are indeed drunk, but with the sober intoxication which kills sin and gives life to the heart... This kind, instead, brings understanding of things not formerly known. They are drunk insofar as they have drunk the wine of that mystical vine which affirms: 'I am the vine, you are the branches.'"*[^31]

St. Ambrose of Milan (c. 340–397) exhorted newly baptized Christians: *"Every time you drink [the Eucharist], you receive the remission of sins and you become intoxicated with the Spirit. It is in this sense that the Apostle said, 'Do not get drunk with wine... but be filled with the Spirit.' He who becomes intoxicated with wine staggers, but he who becomes intoxicated with the Holy Spirit is rooted in Christ. How truly excellent is this intoxication which produces the sobriety of the soul."* So certain was Ambrose about this parallel that his original hymn contained the phrase *ebrietatem Spiritus* ("intoxication of the Spirit") — later considered too bold by copyists who softened it to *profusionem Spiritus* ("outpouring of the Spirit").[35][31]

John Chrysostom, in his *Homilies on Ephesians* (Homily 20), likewise draws the structural parallel: drunkenness makes people passionate, violent, hot-headed, and irrational; being filled with the Spirit produces sobriety, thanksgiving, mutual submission, and psalms. Wine was "given for cheerfulness, not for drunkenness," and the Spirit provides the genuine cheerfulness wine only counterfeits.[^36]

Summary: The Greek Vocabulary of "Under the Influence"

The following table consolidates the key Greek terms and concepts the Ephesian church would have drawn upon to understand Paul's parallel:

Greek Term	Transliteration	Meaning	Relevance to Eph. 5:18
μεθύσκω (pass.)	*methuskō*	"to be saturated/controlled by wine"	The negative prohibition — passive domination by alcohol[1][2]
οἴνωσις	*oinōsis*	"being under the influence of wine" (lighter than *methuskō*)	Established Greek idiom for wine-influence[^11]
πληρόω + ἐν πνεύματι	*plēroō en pneumati*	"be filled/brought to completion by/through the Spirit"	The positive command — passive filling by divine agency[4][6]
ἔνθεος	*entheos*	"having the god within," inspired/possessed	Direct parallel: being internally governed by a divine power[13][16]
ἐνθουσιασμός	*enthousiasmos*	"divine inspiration/possession" (Apollo, Dionysus, Muses)	Cultural shorthand for what Paul's Spirit-filling resembles[^15]

Greek Term	Transliteration	Meaning	Relevance to Eph. 5:18
θεόληπτος	*theolēptos*	"seized by a god"	Possession language — an external power has laid hold of the person[16][17]
θεοφόρος	*theophoros*	"god-bearing," vessel inhabited by deity	The person as container/vehicle for divine presence[^16]
κάτοχος	*katochos*	"held fast" by a spirit/power	The state of being restrained and governed by an external agent[^17]
νηφάλιος μέθη	*nēphalios methē*	"sober intoxication" (Philo's formulation)	The precise theological term for Spirit-filling as divine "inebriation"[31][32][^33]
θεία μανία	*theia mania*	"divine madness" (Plato's *Phaedrus*)	Philosophical framework for deity governing the inner person[18][19]

Conclusion

The Ephesian church did not need a modern English idiom to grasp that Paul was commanding them to be "under the influence" of the Holy Spirit. They inhabited a linguistic and cultural world saturated with precisely this concept. The *methu*-family of words semantically encoded the notion of being dominated, saturated, and controlled by wine. The *entheos/enthousiasmos/theolēptos* vocabulary encoded the identical structural state produced by divine rather than alcoholic agency. The Dionysiac cult — actively practiced in Ephesus — had institutionalized the very equation Paul subverts: wine = vehicle of spirit-possession. And Philo's *nēphalios methē* formulation gave the Jewish-Hellenistic intelligentsia the precise oxymoron that captures Paul's meaning exactly.

Paul's injunction in Ephesians 5:18 functions on every level simultaneously: a prohibition of Dionysiac cult practice, a reorientation of the intoxication-as-spiritual-experience framework, and a positive command to yield — passively, continuously (*plērousthe*, present tense) — to the governing, saturating, animating influence of the Holy Spirit. For the Ephesian reader, there was no ambiguity. The parallel was built into the grammar, the vocabulary, the cult, and the philosophy of their world.

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